
Objects as Archives of a Disrupted Past

The *Lengnangulong* Sacred Stone from Vanuatu in France, Revisited

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Objects that were estranged from ex-colonies and are now kept in overseas museums serve as archives of the past, a past largely disrupted by colonialism. For Vanuatu, some objects of cultural heritage that are kept in museums have been recently reconnected to their original places, lineages, and even individual owners. The *Lengnangulong* sacred stone of Magam Village in North Ambrym is one such object, even though it is only one example in a rich tradition of carved sacred stones. As alienated and contested property in Vanuatu, *Lengnangulong* is kept and exhibited in the Pavillon des Sessions of the Louvre Museum in Paris, which is a contested exhibition space in itself. Here, I provide an update on discussions regarding ownership and *kopiraet* (Indigenous copyright) that have been accelerating in Vanuatu in recent years and on claims for repatriation of this important valuable.

■ **KEYWORDS:** art, cultural property, *Lengnangulong*, museums, repatriation, Vanuatu

The material culture and arts of Vanuatu and wider Melanesia were subject to the collecting frenzies of the so-called “Museum Age” or the “Expedition Period” of anthropology (roughly the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and, as a result, are now kept in museums around the world (e.g., O’Hanlon and Welsch 2000). Ethnologists and early anthropologists ventured out into “the field” for brief intervals, collecting “facts”—and objects—much in the sense that a butterfly collector collects butterflies, returning to their armchairs soon after and using artifacts to deduce knowledge of the “visited” culture. Due to this “art of excision” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), museums hold “ethnographic artifacts” of people in other times and other places without the local knowledge that was originally attached to these valuable objects. Their collection or acquisition contexts were often particularly silenced, in order to give a semblance of authenticity to the assembled materials, transforming artifacts into art and, by doing so, creating and maintaining a commodity arts market (cf. Kopytoff 1986). It did not take long before these “tribal arts,” which had been traded, exchanged, bought, or stolen in colonial contexts shortly before, started gaining value in vaults and basements of museums (Clifford 1985).

The largest collections of historical materials from Vanuatu are kept in the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, the Quai Branly Museum



in Paris, the British Museum in London, and the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. The Museum der Kulturen in Basel holds a collection of 2,480 objects amassed by Swiss ethnologist Felix Speiser during an expedition he undertook to the then New Hebrides between 1910 and 1912 (Speiser 1923, 1996; see also Kaufmann 2000). Albert B. Lewis's travels through Melanesia for the Field Museum South Pacific Expedition between 1909 and 1911 were specifically set up as a collecting trip in competition with the Germans, who by then had been emptying what was German New Guinea at the time at a very hasty pace. Lewis collected an astonishing fourteen thousand objects in Melanesia in total (Lewis 1932; see also Welsch 1998). In the New Hebrides, where he met with Speiser on Paama, Lewis collected a total of twelve hundred objects. As the former colonial powers of the Condominium of the New Hebrides (from 1906 until 1980, when it gained independence and became the Republic of Vanuatu), both France and the United Kingdom also possess large collections of historical materials from Vanuatu. The Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, for example, holds Vanuatu collections made in the area successively by William H. R. Rivers (1914), John Layard (1942), A. Bernard Deacon (1934), and Tom Harrisson (1937).¹

In France, the largest collection of Vanuatu materials is housed in the Quai Branly Museum (combining the collections of the former Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie and parts of the collections of the Musée de l'Homme), but museums such as the Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, et Amérindiens in Marseille and the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle in La Rochelle also hold considerable collections. The Pavillon des Sessions of the Musée du Louvre exhibits some of the masterpieces of Vanuatu in France, and is a contested exhibition space. Opened in 2000, the Pavillon, from its inception, was meant to serve as an annex to the planned museum for *arts premiers* that later became the Quai Branly Museum. The masterpieces, however, did not make it to the Quai Branly Museum, which was opened as such in 2006. Instead, the masterpieces from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas remained in the Pavillon at the Louvre in a permanent exhibition entitled "150 Chefs d'Oeuvres du Musée du Quai Branly" (see Price 2007). For Vanuatu, the Chefs d'Oeuvres exhibition shows some of the highlights of Vanuatu art such as three tree-fern figures from the Banks Islands in North Vanuatu and the *Trrou Kōrrou* statue, also known as the "blue man" from Malo, which was bought in Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital town on Efate Island, by members of the Korrigane Expedition in 1934–1935. Another icon for Vanuatu is also shown in the Chefs d'Oeuvres exhibition: the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone from Ambrym in North-Central Vanuatu.

As disputed property in France and in Vanuatu, the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone has been subject to heated debate concerning its ownership and *kopiraet* (Indigenous copyright). In previous work (DeBlock 2017a), I have elaborated on the request for repatriation by the Tubuvi family of Magam in North Ambrym, which is supported by the Vanuatu Cultural Center and National Museum in Port Vila, and on the subsequent repatriation requests since Zaki Tubuvi's first actual request in 1997 for the repatriation of his alienated property from France. In this article, I will add to these discussions by drawing from additional fieldwork on the island of Ambrym in the summer of 2019. I will particularly go into ownership and *kopiraet* disputes on Ambrym since my initial work of 2017 on *Lengnangulong*, and provide an update on these issues.²

The *Lengnangulong* Sacred Stone, Revisited

During a trip to Vanuatu in late 2015, while I was chatting with some local staff members at the Vanuatu Cultural Center and National Museum in Port Vila, I was mentioning that I had recently submitted an article to *Museum Anthropology* (see above and DeBlock 2017a) dealing with

the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone from the island of Ambrym that, since 2000, has been exhibited in the biggest museum of the world: the Louvre in Paris. *Lengnangulong* is a sacred stone in the form of a beautifully carved face that is the container for the spirit of *Lengnangulong*, who is a pig-devouring creature that brought wealth to its owners by way of pigs with spiraling tusks (traditional money). I had recorded the life history of this sacred sculpture during fieldwork carried out on Ambrym in 2009, tracing the origin and original copyright of the stone back to the Tubuvi family of Magam Village in North Ambrym and to living descendants Zaki and his son David Tubuvi (DeBlock 2017a). Among local people in Vanuatu, it has been known for decades that the original rights for ownership of the stone belong to the Tubuvi clan, but the story had not been recorded yet, and it had certainly not been published. In 2015, however, when I brought up the story of *Lengnangulong* in that informal chat with my friends at the Cultural Center, this sparked something among them and they started discussing with me some recent new claims for local ownership of this “sacred stone turned artwork” that is often referred to—also in Vanuatu—as an icon for Vanuatu that is now of invaluable worth in the Louvre in Paris.

Not long after I left Vanuatu in 2015, I double-checked these conflicting property claims that, it seemed, had been emerging. On social media, I asked my friends at the Cultural Center to repeat the things they had told me back then, and if anything had come yet of these new claims



Figure 1. Exhibition hall in the Pavillon des Sessions of the Louvre Museum in 2010, showcasing some of the masterpieces from Vanuatu and Melanesia. The *Trrou K  rou* or “Blue Man” statue from Malo island in Vanuatu is shown in the front; in the back one can see the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone from Magam Village, North Ambrym, Vanuatu. Photo is courtesy of the author.

for ownership. Remarkably, all answers were that it is in fact still Zaki Tubuvi that holds the original copyright to the sacred stone. Nobody seemed really taken aback by me asking, but I also felt I had better not push for clarification or confront anybody with the fact that they told me something else when I last saw them. And here I was, with an idea for an article and a promise of an update on newly emerging property claims for art alienated from Vanuatu a long time ago. Nobody in Vanuatu seemed to be willing to admit that they (probably) had more info. I double-checked with other knowledgeable people, such as my brother from Ambrym into whose family I was adopted during my long-term fieldwork (since 2009) and who works and lives in Port Vila, but nobody seemed to have heard anything about concurrent claims. So, was it gossip back in 2015 during that chat at the Vanuatu Cultural Center? In Bislama, the Pidgin language of Vanuatu, gossip or things that are not supposed to be openly discussed is called *tok haed*, which translates as “hidden speech” or “silent speech” and which refers to an old strategy used by Big Men to discuss and disseminate secret and sacred knowledge (see Bolton 2003). Did this tell me anything new? How much of the story I wrote down in *Museum Anthropology* was right? And is Zaki Tubuvi the rightful claimant to ownership of the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone? The official version is that he is, and this version is supported by the Vanuatu Cultural Center.

Zaki’s claim for ownership of the *Lengnangulong* dates back to 1996, when he saw his alienated property inside the Vanuatu Cultural Center and National Museum during the major “Arts of Vanuatu” exhibition that opened there under the title “Spirit Blong Bubu I Kam Bak” (Bislama for “The Spirits of the Ancestors Return”) and that then traveled to the Centre Culturel Tjibaou in Nouméa, New Caledonia, and afterwards on to the major institutions in Europe that had facilitated the exhibition in the form of valuable loans from their historical collections. The *Lengnangulong* was one of those objects that returned to Vanuatu for the exhibition. Zaki’s family’s claim of ownership of the stone actually predates his claim, but seeing the stone at the



Figures 2 and 3. Front and side views of the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone in the “150 Masterpieces” exhibition at the Pavillon des Sessions 2010. Photos are courtesy of the author.

Cultural Center in Port Vila sparked his desire to have a connection to it again. The first official request for repatriation made by Zaki Tubuvi, assisted by the Vanuatu Cultural Center, dates from 1997. Further correspondences with the museum date from 2001, 2004, and 2005.

The *Lengnangulong* was “collected” (it was bought) in Vanuatu, then the New Hebrides, in 1949 by French anthropologist Jean Guiart, who had only by 1947 arrived in New Caledonia in order to head the Institut Français d’Océanie. The 2005 letter requesting *Lengnangulong*’s repatriation, written by then Cultural Center director Marcellin Abong, mentioned the core of the problem, which was that Jean Guiart, in 1949, bought the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone in Magam in North Ambrym from the wrong people, those who were not its rightful owners (see DeBlock 2017a). In Vanuatu, this kind of spurious acquisition is tantamount to stealing. Thus, it is now said, anthropologist Jean Guiart stole the *Lengnangulong*. On the other hand, by 1949, waves of missionaries had been encouraging people to sell or get rid in whatever way of ritual artifacts they had and held on to for so long. The *Lengnangulong* sacred stone was only one of those artifacts. Many other objects were taken out and have since received much less attention; they did not rise to fame, like *Lengnangulong*. The Quai Branly Museum exhibits a selection of sacred stones from Vanuatu, which are less “masterpiece”- or trope-worthy and are shown in a dark cavern-like corridor that also exhibits a selection of *Rambaramp* effigies from Malakula, Vanuatu (DeBlock 2017a). The case is that Guiart was able to buy the *Lengnangulong*, for a small amount of money, because he did know at the time that he was buying it from people who were not its rightful owners.

In France, the original keeper of the stone was the Musée de l’Homme, until it was decided that a new museum, the Quai Branly Museum, should be built. As mentioned above, in the years to come it was decided that the masterpieces of the Musée de l’Homme were to be given a space in the Louvre Museum as some sort of satellite for the soon-to-open Musée du Quai Branly. As also mentioned above, the Quai Branly Museum opened its doors in 2006, but the “150 Chefs d’Oeuvres du Musée du Quai Branly” remained in the Louvre. *Lengnangulong*, as one of those 150 masterpieces of world heritage, is still exhibited in the Pavillon des Sessions in the Seine wing of the enormous Louvre castle. Since then, the Pavillon has been a topic of debate in France. One of the fiercest critics has been in fact the Louvre’s president and director at the time, Pierre Rosenberg, who fiercely opposed the idea that these “fetishes” from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas were to be seen under the same roof as the Mona Lisa and other masterpieces of European history (Price 2007). From the Musée de l’Homme, where *Lengnangulong* was kept since 1949, to the Pavillon des Sessions in the Louvre, where it has been exhibited since 2000 in what by now is a permanent exhibition (the “150 Masterpieces” exhibition), to the Quai Branly Museum, which opened in 2006 but without its masterpieces that are shown in the Louvre, the question must be asked: who owns *Lengnangulong* in France?

And who owns *Lengnangulong* in Vanuatu? The Tubuvi family owns (the copyright to) the original stone in the Louvre, but copies of the sacred stone are also widely for sale at handicraft markets in town and on Ambrym, where contemporary sculptors are carving the face of *Lengnangulong* in soft stone, many of them without having ever seen an image of the original. They recreate the face of *Lengnangulong* from oral tradition, from stories of how it looks, or from memory or from seeing old images. One such image was its imprint on pre-independence French Franc coins. The replicas of *Lengnangulong* that are for sale in town and on Ambrym are often much more crudely carved than *Lengnangulong* itself, which, it is said on Ambrym, is not even carved; it is not humanmade: it is a spirit; it is not a sculpture. Copy *Lengnangulong* sculptures, however, are more expensive than other tourist arts for sale, precisely because of the original stone’s inherent meaning and value but also because people want to reclaim and own again the riches that are attached to its traditional sphere, as a bringer of pigs with spiraling tusks, but also because of its more recent meaning and value, in Paris, as priceless art.

The Vanuatu Cultural Center, until a couple of years ago, also exhibited a copy of *Lengnangulong*. Its label mentioned Zaki Tubuvi as the rightful owner. It also mentioned that this stone was a copy, that the original was kept in the then Musée de l'Homme, and that this "is a very powerful stone which brings prosperity and good fortune to its owner." The label in the Louvre only mentions the eighteenth to early nineteenth century as the object's origin date and briefly that it is a magic stone for the acquisition of pigs and that Guiart was its collector. There is no mention about the requests for repatriation or the contested collection history, nor is there mention of the owner, Zaki Tubuvi.

In Magam, Zaki, who is a very old man now, has been appealing for the repatriation of the *Lengnangulong* for many years and has agreed that, if the stone was to return to Vanuatu, it should be kept at the Vanuatu Cultural Center and National Museum and not come back to Ambrym. But, sensing that *Lengnangulong* will never come back to Vanuatu, he also suggested to the Louvre that it pay him rent for keeping and exhibiting his property. In the end, he would be happy with a mention of his name on the label in the Louvre, just like he was mentioned on the label of the copy stone in the Cultural Center. This would at least recognize him as the owner and reconnect him with his property, albeit minimally. As to date, nothing has come of the repatriation request, and communications with Quay Branly have come to a quiet halt.



Figure 4. Image of the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone on a pre-independence French Franc coin.³



Figure 5. Copy of *Lengnangulong* and some other sculptures carved in stone and wood for sale on Nobul Beach, a yacht anchorage in North Ambrym and the entry point for visitors to the annual Back to my Roots Festival at Halhal Fantor. Photo is courtesy of Christina Stuhlberger, 2019.

The *Lengnangulong* Sacred Stone, Cultural Revival, and Festivals

During a recent trip to Vanuatu, in August–September 2019, to make a documentary film, I asked once more about the competing property claims concerning *Lengnangulong*. After all, since 2009, since my initial fieldwork on Ambrym, I had always vaguely heard of competing claims. I never made much of these claims, as I had picked up on how complex these stories were and how nervous most people got when talking about rival claims for ownership of things. Instead of typing away with my friends on Facebook, as I did in 2015, I had the chance to talk face-to-face again, on a village level, about this story. In 2019 in North Ambrym, I returned to my previous field sites. I also went back to Magam Village, to visit Zaki and David Tubuvi again and to give them a copy of my article in *Museum Anthropology* and some copies of the photographs I had taken years before of the *Lengnangulong* inside the Louvre.

Not long after, I learned about one rival property claim in specific: it was by Worwor of Fanla, a *kastom* (“custom”) village of before in North Ambrym. Worwor came up to me on several occasions, insisting that he knew that I had just visited David Tubuvi in Magam and had given him some photos. He also told me, in quite an imperative voice, that he was the original owner of the sacred stone and not the Tubuvis. Worwor is a descendant of Tain Mal and Tofor of Fanla, a father and son duo generally seen by all on Ambrym and even in Vanuatu as the last Big Men who accomplished their Big Man status in the “male graded society” system, which on Ambrym is called *Mage* (see DeBlock 2013, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b; and Patterson 1981, 2001, 2002). When Tofor died in Fanla in the 1990s, it is often heard, the *Mage* male graded system died with him. But now, in 2019, Worwor was telling me that he or, better, his family line in Fanla, is the rightful owner of the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone. It is a claim known by the Cultural Center in Port Vila, but it is a claim largely ignored, as rivalry and competition were and always will be

central to traditional kastom practice. Officially, the Cultural Center recognizes undisputedly Zaki and David Tubuvi of Magam Village to be the rightful claimants.

Worwor's claim, however, clearly illustrates the ongoing rivalry and competition in new ways of doing kastom. Worwor's version of the story is that *Lengnangulong*, after it washed ashore on Fona Beach in North Ambrym, made its way to Fanla, high up on the slopes of Mount Tüvyù. All versions seem to agree that the spirit of *Lengnangulong* (and thus also its materialization, the stone) came from neighboring Pentecost Island and that it landed on Fona Beach, where it hid for a while in a cave.⁴ Johnson Koran, my adoptive father and the current chief of Fona Village, had explained to me years before that *Lengnangulong* had actually arrived on Ambrym at Fona Beach, but at the time I had not given much attention to this "detail." That Worwor provided the same version now, at least as far as its "arrival scene" on Ambrym is concerned, was remarkable. Moreover, it was also Johnson in Fona as well as David Tubuvi in Magam and, rivaling with the latter, Worwor of Fanla, who told me in 2019 that the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone is not really a sculpture, that it is not humanmade, and that it is a spirit and not a sculpture. I had heard this too before, but never so outspoken as in 2019. It is as if the discussions concerning the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone—and the spirit for which it is the container—are accelerating and intensifying and that more people now seem to want a piece of the ownership puzzle.

On Ambrym, as in many other island locations throughout the archipelago, new ways of doing kastom include the organization of cultural festivals, often state-funded, in order to celebrate kastom and *kalja* ("culture"). At festivals, men dress up, performing revived ritual sequences of their ancient culture, for themselves as well as for their local and tourist audiences, but underlying sensibilities such as who has the right to perform what kind of dance, song, or ritual sequence do not always surface in these performances and are interpreted only by some local people. The biggest local cultural festival that features in the current cultural revivalist movement in the archipelago, arguably, is the yearly Back to My Roots Festival of Halhal Fantor in North Ambrym (see DeBlock 2013, 2018a, 2018b). With the male graded society systems of before (e.g., the Mage on Ambrym, the *Nimangki* and *Maki* on Malakula, and the *Warsangul* on South Pentecost) being largely in disuse, the meaning and value of these "cultural festivals turned commodities" is heavily disputed locally (DeBlock 2013, 2018a, 2018b). Festivals, however, as "celebrations of kastom and kalja," form an important and integral part of contemporary cultural experience and the formation of national cultural identity.

Festivals are new competition grounds where disagreements and disputes regarding the defunct graded society systems surface. At Back to My Roots, for example, an age-old competition between Fanla and Neuiha, a competing village for kastom in North Ambrym, is continued (for earlier competition between Tain Mal of Fanla and Mal Meleun of Neuiha, see Guiart 1951). Back to My Roots is Neuiha-linked (geographically and through family lines), while in recent years the Fanla Arts Festival has been in disuse. Fanla is much higher up than most other villages and thus less easily accessible for tourists. Fanla is losing its former weight in the current revival of the kastom movement. It is in this light that Worwor's claim is relevant, as he is a claimant of ancient power and prestige and a claimant of kastom ownership for almost all ancient aspects of kastom for North Ambrym, as his ancestors Tain Mal and particularly Tofor were before him (see Patterson 1981, 2002). Claiming the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone as his property fits perfectly into this scheme.

The changes in kastom and ownership of the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone are related, for they are centered on property and kopiraet claims. As Ivan Karp wrote, festivals are like "living museums" (1991: 280). As "celebrations of kastom and kalja," they can be held for the sake of cultural revival. As moments at which today's local entrepreneurs offer their wares, they can be held as vehicles for the commodification of things. At these moments, ritual sites become the

“back region” of the tourist site (cf. MacCannell 1976). As such, their context is dual, offering a legitimate response to the paucity of means to (continue to) make a living by selling valued items as commodities as well as to an equally legitimate desire to promote *kastom*. This too relates to earlier movements, when ritual and its objects were traded between local groups, with some Big Men and their communities receiving great power and prestige from this activity, which is what is known in the literature as the now largely defunct system of “cultural commerce” between the islands (see Huffman 1996; Patterson 2001; and DeBlock 2017b).

Kastom unites, but it divides as well by way of rivalries and competition, as it did in the past (Larcom 1982). Old *kastom* rivalries between villages that continue to exist in the present are now dealt with in festivals on commercial and ritual grounds. Local organizers compete in getting as many visitors as possible to their festivals. That, nowadays, only a few men climb the ladder of prestige of the male graded society again, or that women have access to things they previously never had access to, generates discussion and disagreement on the local level, not in the least about *kopiraet* and the nature of *kastom*.⁵ What is brought to the stage is some sort of bricolage of ritual: fragments of the vast and powerful ritual complexes of the past in which sacred and secular elements were combined and that consumed a lot of people’s energies and resources (thus, both uniting and dividing them). While, in the past, ritual cycles could take many years of preparation, it is now only the most dramatic fragments, their culmination moments, that are reenacted. Like *Lengnangulong*, which rose to fame precisely because it was estranged a long time ago, contemporary *kastom* features around the highlights of *kalja*: that which is remembered, which is (re)valued.

Newly made artifacts and rituals seem to not reach the fame of their historical forebears. At festivals and other commodified performances for audiences, dances are performed and artifacts remade for the sake of cultural revival as well as tourism. In the process, what has come to be known as *stret kastom* (“straight,” or “good custom”) is opposed to *kiaman kastom* (“liar’s,” or “bad custom”) or *Vatu kastom* (the *Vatu* being Vanuatu’s national currency; thus “money custom”). Different views are voiced by different people concerning old “as opposed to” revived *kastom*. People never openly accuse each other of participating in *Vatu kastom*, but many agree that those who participate in revived *kastom* do it for the money. On the other hand, people who do not make money through culture are often jealous of those who do. On Ambrym, one local friend told me of the Back to My Roots group that “they just jump around, they do not know anything” (“*oli jump olbaot nomo, oli no save nating*”). To him, *kastom* is lost (“*kastom i lus*”) and cannot be brought back. Therefore, he said, people should not try to bring it back, and certainly not for reasons of money. Before, he added, a man had to earn a grade, and even though the graded society system was competitive, there was a certain level of selection. Young boys and men had to show Big Man qualities from childhood onward. Now, there are no Big Men left to pay grades to, at least not in a rightful manner, and disagreements and disputes are rampant precisely because the last legitimate Big Men, such as Tain Mal and Tofor of Fanla, died without transferring their knowledge and grades onto their possible successors.

Concurrent ownership claims for artifacts and rituals accelerate in this setting. While concurrent claims seemed not to matter too much in 2009, when I sporadically heard of people contesting the Tubuvis to be the rightful owners of *Lengnangulong*, or when I heard phrases such as “*oli jump olbaot nomo, oli no save nating*,” by 2019 these discussions seemed to have intensified. What contemporary *kastom* in Vanuatu mostly stands for is a going back to the past, even though this is not always easily accomplished. What is nowadays referred to as customary arts—or arts remade after their historical examples—is particularly driven by an interplay between tradition and innovation. These customary arts are made by a wide variety of makers,

representing the ongoing relevance of the past in the present and the continuation of older art forms in contemporary social contexts (Skinner and Bolton 2012). Damian Skinner and Lissant Bolton use the word “customary” rather than “traditional” precisely because these practices are not static but represent processes of adaptation and change: “The past does not appear in the present in an unchanged state, but is reinterpreted according to the needs of contemporary makers and the various audiences for whom they produce art” (2012: 467).

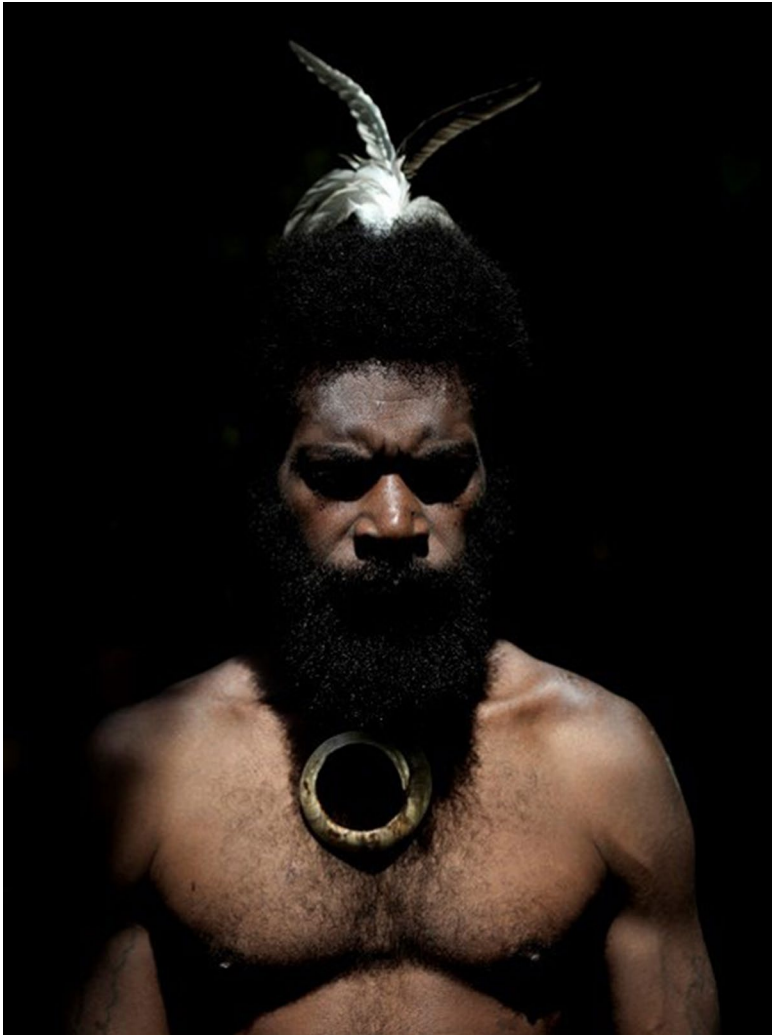


Figure 6. Worwor of Fanla. Photograph by Eric Lafforgue on Flickr, 2009. Comments included: “beautiful light!!! It’s a very mysterious portrait!!! Is he a warrior?” (by perfectdayjosep) and “this is THE male” (by Stefano Kerberos). Reproduced with kind permission of the photographer.



Figure 7. The Back to My Roots group of Halhal Fantor, North Ambrym, performing a revived version of a *rom* masked dance ceremony during the Third National Arts Festival of Vanuatu in Port Vila in 2009. Photo is courtesy of the author.

Conclusion: Objects as Archives of a Disrupted Past

While the gossip back in 2015 just outside the Vanuatu Cultural Center between some of the staff members and myself seemed to be not much more than speculations, the additional information that was disclosed to me in North Ambrym in 2019 by Johnson Koran and Zaki Tubuvi as well as Worwor of Fanla seemed to be mostly infused by jealousies and rivalries, by people who are directly involved with the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone as well as the current kastom revival. In a way, this is making kastom, making *tredisin* (“tradition”). Jealousies and rivalries are part and parcel of the competitive traditional sphere as well as contemporary society in Vanuatu, something that must be engaged with in order to make legitimate the claims to reconnect with a rich and powerful past for all *ni-Vanuatu* (Vanuatu nationals), a past that was denied to them for a long time, a past that was disrupted by colonialism (including the missions) and that is now heavily discussed and disputed and of which objects serve as archives. Discussions regarding the ownership of long-lost things have accelerated within the revival context, with more and more people nowadays claiming ownership to long-lost things in overseas museums. Competing claims have intensified also because of the monetary worth that things like *Lengnangulong* now have, as priceless art in Paris, in a way comparable to their original function as bringers of traditional wealth. The “sacred stone turned artwork” as well as “cultural festivals turned

commodities” frames have made for even more competition, a renewal of old *kastom* rivalries, and renewed ways of producing and performing *kastom* on revived cultural grounds.

The disruption of cultural life and the removal of all material things that featured in ritual life has made for even more question marks. If *Lengnangulong* would not have been taken away by Jean Guiart in 1949 but would have remained on Ambrym, then property issues and disagreements would have most probably surfaced as well. But, being absent for so long and having been “collected” (bought) in such dubious circumstances (from the wrong owners) have certainly made competing claims work more against each other, creating additional frictions. *Lengnangulong* is generally considered on Ambrym and in Vanuatu as one of the most important objects that has been estranged. And, at least from the local perspective, it has a clear pedigree (be it a disputed pedigree). In North Ambrym, it is often heard that *Lengnangulong* was the spirit that regulated life on Ambrym until 1949, when it was removed by Guiart. Life on Ambrym, it is often said, has not been the same since: wealth and status have deteriorated, and the abundance of pigs with curved tusks has drastically dropped. *Lengnangulong* is restless in the Louvre in Paris, people say, trying to escape from the exhibition hall in the Pavillon, where it is exhibited, and wanting to return home to Ambrym (see DeBlock 2017a). At night, it is said, *Lengnangulong* trembles inside its glass box in the Louvre and breaks out, trying to escape and come back to Vanuatu, but the monumental building does not let his spirit escape.

Parallel, in Vanuatu, cultural revival of rituals—and revived things—continues to take place through festivals that are in themselves remnants of disrupted pasts. The male graded society systems of the past are disrupted, with no continuity of transference of grades or knowledge. It is now impossible to accumulate the wealth necessary for several grade-takings, as would be expected of legitimate, competitive Big Men. Mage performed at Back to My Roots, for example, incurs only a fraction of the former costs that entailed transfers of energy and wealth for each item to which the candidate gained access (sacred insignia, objects, dances, songs) and of community participation in certain sequences, all of which has no place in today’s festivalized Mage that is performed by only a few men. It is a spectacle to watch, not one to take part in. The timing of the ritual performances and the duration of the festival are too short for anything to be real-time, keeping up the pace for the paying audience: the tourists. At Back to My Roots, culture, in the form of the Mage, is performed for visiting tourists but also local audiences who are proud to see aspects of their lost and powerful past again. In the process, *kastom* is remade, artifacts recrafted, and ownership and property rights (*kopiraet*) of old and newly made things reestablished or, rather, problematized. Zaki Tubuvi is an old and sick man now who will never see his alienated property again, while Worwor of Fanla’s claim for ownership of the same valuable, an icon for the (art) history of Vanuatu, has been becoming increasingly louder in an attempt to reclaim and hold on to old *kastom* hegemony for Ambrym and Vanuatu.

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NOTES

1. From 1908 onward, W. H. R. Rivers had continually carried out research in the area aboard the mission ship *The Southern Cross*, with short stays on several of the islands in the New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands. Then Cambridge students John Layard and A. Bernard Deacon carried out fieldwork in the New Hebrides, respectively, from 1914 to 1915 and from 1926 to 1927. Layard, a pupil of Rivers's at Cambridge, worked on the Small Islands just off Northeast Malakula (Vao, Atchin, and Wala). Deacon, who was a pupil of Alfred C. Haddon at Cambridge, worked in Southwest Bay Malakula and very briefly on Ambrym. He died in Southwest Bay nearing the end of his fieldwork. Layard only published some of his main findings, abundant with data, in 1942 (on Vao; volumes on Atchin and Wala were supposed to follow but never did), while Deacon's work, based on fieldwork carried out only some years later but of a rather pessimistic, “salvage anthropology” kind, was posthumously published by 1934.
2. I have carried out ethnographic field work in Vanuatu in 2006, 2008, and, for a longer period, 2009, as well as from 2010 to 2011. I have returned on several occasions in 2014, 2015, and 2019 for a documentary film project.
3. See “New Hebrides,” in the *NGC World Coin Price Guide*. www.ngccoin.com/price-guide/world/new-hebrides-20-francs-km-3.1-1967-1970-cuid-1087966-duid-1442012.
4. Fona is the village where I carried out the bulk of my research and the village in which I was adopted into a family, starting in 2009, which was the time that I started my long-term fieldwork on the island of Ambrym.
5. For earlier discussion on the emergence and adjustments of indigenous kopiraet legislature in Vanuatu, see in particular Geismar (2005a, 2005b).

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